

Leaves Dancing

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Summary: A hero's ceremony in Sunnydale. Future chapter of Stakeout.
SPOILERS!

Leaves Dancing

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Note: click or paste link in the middle of story to hear song.

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The silence was deafening.

I know that statement is contradictory, but in this case it was true. It was so quiet that I could hear the blood rushing through my ears. Earlier, the only sounds were footsteps on gravel and the whispers of the leaves rustling on this sunny day.

There's an irony I've only thought of a thousand times before.

Sunny day. Sunnydale. The sunny valley.

You wouldn't expect such a cheerfully named place to hide such evil.

Yet there it was. Sunnydale was the home of the Boca del Inferno. The Hellmouth. A mystical portal that drew all sorts of supernatural creatures and events to our fair town.

I don't know why I never noticed until a couple of years ago, but people always disappeared or died mysteriously here. You never saw anything about it in the newspapers, so you didn't realize that people were gone until you saw a "For Sale" sign on a house or you saw a picture and wondered where the person was.

When I finally found out what happened here after the sun set, I joined the others in fighting the evil. We had saved the world God knows how many times, but we still lost. Lost battles, lost friends - lost family.

Losing friends was bad. When you don't know someone, it doesn't affect you much. It's just a name, a number, an abstract concept. But when you have a face to put with the name, memories of you and that person talking and doing stuff together and laughing at some dumb joke... that is what makes the battle real. That and spending the night at the cemetery, stake in hand, watching the fresh grave while listening to the leaves dancing in the wind.

None of that had prepared me for losing a family member.

Our group had been lucky until now. We had all lost someone close to us - Jesse, Billy Fordham, Jenny Calendar, Kendra, Faith. We had all stayed home and listened to country music or had eaten ice cream by the half gallon or researched until our eyes couldn't stay open, trying to reduce our grief or at least deaden the pain to the point where it was manageable, and it worked to a certain extent. But now I was standing here, my eyes hidden behind dark glasses and my face expressionless, waiting for everyone to form up by the open grave.

This was a first for me, being at a large funeral. The ones I had been to before would be for family and close friends only, but this was different. The service at the church was attended by a couple of hundred people and the mourners at this graveside service would number at least as many.

Once everyone was in their proper place and standing silently in the sunshine, a signal was given, and the crunch of gravel reached my ears again. I could hear the quiet commands being given to the pallbearers before the piper began to play. Even though I had not been in a church for years before today I recognized the hymn.

<http://www.britannia.org/scotland/scotmusic/pipes/amazinggrace.html>

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Amazing grace, how sweet the sound

> That saved a wretch like me
 I once was lost, but now I'm found

> Was blind, but now I see.<p> _**

The wail of the bagpipes sent a chill down my spine, as I'm sure it did everyone else there. Moving slowly, the pallbearers set the flag draped casket on the framework and formed a line next to the podium.

The speaker stood and moved to the podium, pausing for a moment before beginning to speak. I had already heard the speeches at the church, but this was the one that mattered.

"...With deliberate disregard of the danger to his own life, knowing that there were still armed suspects inside, the man we are honoring today ran into a burning warehouse to rescue a trapped and

unconscious woman. While he and another citizen managed to locate and free the victim, they were set upon by the suspects believed to have started the fire. Staying back to cover the exit of the two citizens, Deputy Harris exchanged gunfire with the suspects, allowing for the two citizens to escape without serious injury. However, the fire reached propane tanks in the warehouse which then exploded, resulting in the deaths of the suspects and of Deputy Harris. For courage above and beyond the call of duty, and for placing the lives of the citizens of Sunnydale above his own, the Sunnydale County Sheriff's Department posthumously awards the Medal of Valor to Deputy Harris, to be presented to his family."

Moving in accordance with softly given commands, a line of deputies moved to along the casket and gave the rifle volleys. Two of the pallbearers moved to the casket and removed the flag, moving to the side before folding it into a triangle and giving it to the speaker at the podium.

Picking up two items from the podium, Sheriff Greer placed them atop of the folded flag and moved toward me, stopping where I stood alone. No other members of our family were there, although my friends stood behind me.

With both hands, Sheriff Greer gave me the flag, nodded his head to me and after his murmured condolences stepped back and walked to the line of important officials. A priest moved forward and gave the final blessing. Finally, a sergeant came forward, called the assembled police officers and deputies to attention, and dismissed them.

Looking down at the flag in my hands, and the Medal of Valor and the deputy sheriff's badge that lay on top of it, I didn't notice Cordy and Willow coming up behind me until I felt their arms around me as I tried to control the moisture running down my cheeks.

"It's OK, Xander. Your Uncle Tim wanted you and Buffy to live. It's OK." Willow's words were soft, but I heard them. "We'll always be here for you. You're not alone."

Willow was right. I'm not alone. They'll be with me when I come back.

When I'm standing in front of the grave tonight. Stake in hand.

Listening to the leaves dancing in the wind.

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file.